My Experiences in the Navy Construction Battalions

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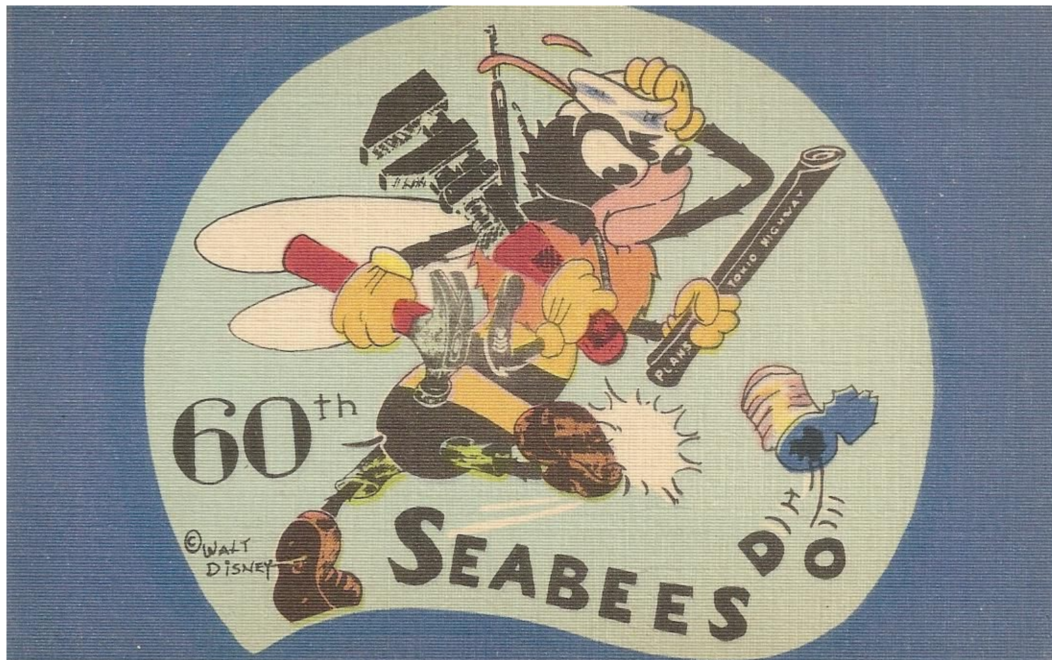

Photos at the end of the story from 60 NCB, WW II, "60th SEABEES Cruise Book"

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Cover by Joe Martfeld

December 7, 1985

Dear cousins,

As you requested many months ago to have me write my experiences in the Navy construction battalions, I have finally got up enough courage to begin. Today is the 44th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. As President Roosevelt said, "A day that will live in infamy."

This past year marks the 40th after the end of World War II. Some time was given to the end of the war and the use of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Most of the media condemned the use of the nuclear bomb, which helped to give me some incentive to write this. If the people who put on these news stories had lived this experience rather than read about it in an air-conditioned study and watched it for 30 minutes on television, they would have a different viewpoint, as I do.

To begin at the beginning, the U.S. had all males between 18-40 years to register for a draft to be selected for military service. This was October, 1940. At the time, I was 23 years old, single and healthy. At the time, I was working construction work at Red Cloud, Nebraska. At the same time, I was engaged to be married to Merle Eyl of Merriman, Nebraska, which I did shortly after. All my working life has been in the construction business and then and now it was necessary to go where work was available. On

December 7, 1941 I was in Spalding, Nebr.; the Japs attacked the U.S. and we were at war. A few weeks later the President sent me a letter for me to report for duty. As most people I was really not prepared to leave on instant notice so the draft board in O Neill allowed me six months to find a place to park my wife and infant son. I continued to work several places during this time, and while I was working on the ammunition depot at Sidney, Nebr., my lifelong friend who was also there (Clement Cuddy) suggested we go to the recruiting office and volunteer to join the Naval construction battalions who were looking for skilled and experienced people. They offered petty officer rating from the start which made the regular Naval personnel unhappy and usually looked on us as poor relation. Needless to say, we were gladly accepted. After some skimpy physical examination, we were sent to Denver to raise our hands and take the oath of obedience, etc. As there was a shortage of training accommodations, we were sent back home to wait for further orders. We were now officially owned and operated by the U.S. Navy but received no time credit or money for this period of time.

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A short history of the Seabees. Shortly after the war began, it was apparent that there would be a need for construction personnel at various locations around the world,

and such personnel should be a part of the armed forces and in uniform. The first battalion started training on January 26, 1942 at Quonset Point Naval Air Station, Quonset Point, Rhode Island. It would be a long while to build advance bases to recapture the territory taken by the Japs (no apologies), some of it in peace time.

In about the second week in November, 1942 I and my family were working on the air base in Ainsworth, Nebr. I received orders to report at the train depot in Omaha for duty. I took my wife Merle and John to Rogers, Arkansas to stay with her parents while I was away. I took a train to Omaha and joined 42 other men from Omaha to go to Camp Rouseau in Davisville, R.I. As the train traveled to the east, other cars were added on and several hundred men unloaded in Davisville to begin basic training. This is called boot camp in Navy language, as lace up leggings and shoes that don't fit are part of the uniform at this stage. We were assigned to companies and barracks, issued clothing, etc. and then started to be tested. I was used to Nebraska cold weather and hard work, but the routine in boot camp in Rhode Island winter was more than a human body could endure. There was an epidemic of spinal meningitis and something they called catarrhal fever. This particular camp was about four inches above sea level, and water stood forever at the top of the sidewalks. Standing in lines which was a lot of our

time, I could see the sputum of the half sick floating in the water. Not very good for the appetite, to say the least. I managed to stay up with the company for about four weeks. We would have to hurry and wait as they say. Sometimes, after rigorous training, we would be wet with sweat and then have to stand in line for the next operation and chill. On Saturdays we had what is called field day and that was details to pick up cigarette butts, scrub floors, wash pots and pans and haul garbage. I was assigned to help pick up garbage. At noon I was really sick--sore throat, headache and all the rest. In the military you have to get sick at the correct time, as they only have sick call at 0800 a.m. and 1800 p.m. (6:00 p.m.). I was so sick I didn't know what to do so I went to our boiler room and my friend, Clem Cuddy, was the fireman. I laid on the floor behind the boiler until sick call. (Clem knew how to take care of himself.) At sick call time I went to the infirmary where a corpsman put a thermometer in my mouth. It went to 104 before it melted, and I went to the hospital. In military life you have to have a fever of 104° or die to prove you are as sick as you say you are. There were so many cases at this time the hospital space was full, so there was a huge mess hall converted to hospital use. The only advantage being in the hospital was being able to rest and not answer roll call or have to tramp down snow. I spent about a week in the

hospital, gargling with saltwater and getting occasional aspirin. Finally my Nebraska antibodies overcame the Rhode Island bacteria and I was sent back to the company. While I was in the hospital, our battalion had completed boot camp and moved to a new area for advanced training. Our whole battalion had been reorganized so I was a member of "C" company platoon six with all new people, and my former friends were scattered to different companies and barracks. I was still weak from the fever and depressed. This was on Christmas Eve, and the men who were not on their first liberty to go into the city were singing White Christmas to someone's guitar. I really felt lonesome and homesick.

We began our advanced training in all phases of warfare, firing range, and all the rest. Our instructors now were the U.S. Marines, some with about a square foot of campaign ribbons on their chests, and the inhuman drill instructor was left behind to torture another bunch of green recruits, etc. I began to get my strength back, and being treated like a human being, I almost enjoyed the routine. Our battalion always had the best cooks and bakers in the service and the food was good. Our cooks and bakers were also enlisted (volunteered) from good paying civilian jobs and knew their trade rather than going through the military school. After six weeks of advanced training, we had our dress revue in the EE drill hall and were inspected and observed by all the gold

braid in camp. We were commissioned the 60th Naval construction battalion and ready to be ordered to our "island X."

We were shortly after taken back to the railroad where we had arrived 12 weeks previous. Even the band was on hand to play California, Here I Come. We boarded Pullman cars and went first class for six days and nights from coast to coast. The night we left must have been about the last of February, 1943. The next morning we got newspapers and the headline was about the terrible fire in the Coconut Grove Lounge in Boston where so many people lost their lives. The other news was about the worst blizzard to ever strike the East Coast. Lucky 60th CBs. After six days on the train trip, we arrived in Oakland, Calif. and by bus, were taken to a new camp still under construction--Camp Parks near Livermore, Calif. The place was new barracks, but all else was mud, but the California climate and having windows open were like going to heaven. I was granted five days leave plus four days for travel, so I was able to get home to my lovely wife and family for a short time.

After my short leave I returned to Camp Parks where there was little duty and waited for all the stragglers to return from leave. When all was accomplished, on March 9 we reloaded our buses and left for Oakland and boarded the midnight special train for Port Hueneme (why-knee-me). There

we were assigned to quonset huts with 40 men per unit. While here waiting for further orders, I stood guard duty in fog so thick I couldn't have recognized an enemy if he ran over me. It was cold and lonesome at night and listen to the fog horns on the ships blasting their Bee Ohoo. I also got some schooling in loading ships at the dock. Our freighter's ship was the SS Jupiter, and I saw our construction equipment being loaded. It was very interesting for a hayseed from Nebraska.

A few days later the SS President Monroe pulled up to the dock, and we boarded it for a cruise to the south Pacific. The President Monroe was a former around-the-world passenger and freighter. It was a Merchant Marine ship owned and operated by the American President Lines of San Francisco. Aboard were also Army personnel, so we had 2500 people on a ship large enough to carry 1000. My bunk was in the forward hold where the bunks were steel frames (standard Navy equipment at that time), five high with enough room to barely get between the next row. I always got a top bunk where usually there would be an air duct that I could use for a night table. The thirty days and nights on the Monroe were almost as bad as boot camp. We left Pt. Hueneme about March 23 and headed toward the equator which we crossed on April 1. They had the customary initiation into the realm of King Neptune. The ship had insufficient fresh water, so the water

coolers were turned on twice a day, and you had to fill your GI canteen to get by in between. As we progressed into the tropics, the ship got hotter and hotter. There are no shade trees on ships, so we were always standing on steel hotter than a stove (depot stove at that). Our showers and latrines were wood frame buildings where saltwater was pumped into a trough at one end and into a pipe and overboard at the other. Shaving in saltwater is not easy on the razor blades or the face either. To illustrate the difference between then and now, I bring this up. One day I went to shave and wash up. I left my watch on the little shelf over the wash basin. Five minutes later I went back to see if it was still there, and wouldn't you know it was gone. I got the watch as a gift from brother Dale and really hated to lose it. On a long shot, I went up to the purser's office on the bridge and reported the watch missing. He asked me what kind it was so I described it to him. He went immediately to the safe and got it and handed it over to me. After several days we were awakened one morning at daybreak and ordered to our boat stations. At dawn a squadron of Navy fighter planes flew over at mast high. How beautiful they were. We were now entering the New Hebrides Islands, and sailing between some of those small atolls they seemed so close you could nearly touch the treetops. These channels were protected by mines and that was the reason for muster at the lifeboat stations.

We passed nearly over the wreck of the sister ship, the President Coolidge, which had hit one of the mines a few weeks before, but there was no loss of life. A few hours later, we arrived at Esperito Santo Islands in the New Hebrides. There is an immense harbor here and there were ships of every kind as far as the eye could see. In the states we were accustomed to brownouts with no lights allowed, but here in the war zone all the ships had on their lights and signal lights were flashing everywhere. A handy cloud could reflect the signals over the horizon to ships too far away to see directly. Our ship unloaded some personnel, and we then set out for Brisbane, Australia. As we neared the mainland about 10:00 in the morning, I was on guard duty at the entrance to the main dining salon used by the officers. The sea was really rough and almost impossible to stand so I turned a fire bucket upside down and braced my legs. On ships all objects are secured to the deck so nothing can move them. Across the hall (not really called that on a ship) was the galley and troops' mess hall.

About 11:00 a.m. on Easter Sunday, Chaplain Cooper (more about him later) was getting ready to serve communion. The chalice, books and everything loose took off across the floor and I on my bucket, slid toward an open dock high hatch. We had gone through a ground swell or tsunami or whatever you call it. The cooks in the galley climbed on top of the

tables to keep from being scalded by water running over the huge kettles. The mess trays took off like a deck of cards. Some men on the top deck said they could see the bottom of the ship which would have been 30 feet from water line. After passing through the wave, the sea became fairly calm, and a few hours later we were met by a launch and a pilot came aboard and we sailed up the Brisbane River to a dock. This was about sundown, Easter Sunday in Brisbane, Australia. We left the ship in GI trucks and were taken to a camp set up in a racetrack, streets of Army pyramid tents and nearby a huge mess hall. Apparently we were expected and there was a meal prepared. We had huge slabs of roast beef, gobs of butter, homemade style bread (the Aussies didn't bother to wrap their food in wax paper), large pitchers of fresh milk, etc. After 30 days of lamb stew in the evening and wormy oatmeal in the morning, this real food was most appreciated. We had left spring in the states and the heat of the tropics, and now we were in the southern hemisphere and it was fall again. The nights were real cold, but days were most pleasant. We stayed in Brisbane for about 5 weeks. I cannot say how much I enjoyed the time spent in Brisbane. In my estimation these are the finest people in the world. We met the Aussie fighting men later in the jungles of New Guinea. We were allowed liberty every fourth day and would take a tram to the city where the best food and beer anywhere was

served. A dinner with six eggs on a 16 oz. steak with thick slices of bread, milk to drink, vegetables and all the rest cost about 10 shillings. Equal to about a dollar sixty cents in U.S. money. I still regard Australia as the best country in the world. To this day this is one place where American servicemen are welcomed, not for their money but a lasting friendship.

Every year on the Labor Day weekend the members of the 60th CBs have their annual reunion. Last August 30 - September 1 we traveled to St. Augustine, Fla. These people are as close as family, and plans are made ahead for one or more years where the reunion will be held. At St. Augustine our officer in charge of construction (Lt. Betz) gave a short talk about our New Guinea campaign and gave us a paper he had prepared. I will insert this letter which tells about the Australian details. While in Brisbane I gained weight and my clothes were really getting tight.

On June 8 we departed Brisbane for our advance base and staging area in or near Townsville, Australia. Some of the men were sent on the railroad, some by ship. I was lucky to get on an LST ship, which was a Coast Guard ship. A LST is a landing ship's tank. They were shaped like bathtubs, about 200 ft. long and maybe 40 feet wide. There were two decks, the top side and the tank deck at about water line. These ships drew only 9 to 11 ft. deep of water. The top deck was

equipped with an elevator which lowered vehicles to the lower tank deck. The name of the game was the ship ran aground on the beach and the huge bow doors opened and you drove out of the bow doors on a drawbridge-type ramp onto dry ground (you thought). The ships were equipped with a huge anchor which was dropped some distance from the beach and an enormous winch could pull the ship back from the land. Unfortunately this never was necessary on any of the LSTs I was on. We sailed up between the coast of Australia and the great barrier reef. We were in sight of land at all times and it was very pretty. The sea water was a pleasing greenish color due to its shallow depth. There were no waves but only long glassy looking swells which were designed to match the size of our empty bathtub perfectly. The ship would take a long lazy roll to one side, then back on the other. The sensation was like being on an elevator that never stopped. One day I drew mess hall duty and got stuck in the dishwashing compartment. The galley and mess hall were on the top deck, but the dishwashing equipment was on the tank deck as were the sleeping quarters. The men put their dirty plates and cups through a hole in one side. We washed and racked them, and I had to carry these up the ladder (a real steep stairway) to the top deck. When the ship rolled toward me I hung on for life; when it went the other, I stood on my head. This was one of the few times I got seasick.

We arrived at Townsville and were in a camp on a nearby pasture. While in Townsville we loaded and reloaded LSTs for the final leg to Island X. This was Woodlark Island, about halfway between New Guinea and the Solomons. This was about July 2, 1943. I left on the second echelon about one week after the first. Woodlark Island had not been occupied by the Japs so there was no initial contact with the enemy. Our men started to work clearing jungle and laying out an airstrip. There was a coconut plantation on Woodlark and our airstrip went right through the center. On leaving the ship at night, we walked out of the tank deck and onto Woodlark. There was no welcome committee here, only rain. A few yards from the beach there was a tent and field kitchen set up so I went over and got some coffee and waited for daylight. At daylight I found my sea bag, a canvas bag that a Navy man keeps all his possessions in, and with some friends, got a six-man tent and set it up on the edge of the airstrip and between the strip and what would be a future taxiway. Eventually the structures department built a permanent camp on the opposite side of the island. As I was not yet assigned to any particular job, I dug a fox hole as we called them, next to my canvas cot. The next day the Japs had discovered who we were and where we were and paid us a visit. This was my first experience with someone trying to kill me. The air raid's red alert was sounded and we took cover as

best we could. Bombs falling down have an undescribable sound, a real death rattle that is not the least like the sound effects in the movies. I heard the explosions in the distance and then getting closer and closer, then farther away. In a few minutes it was all over and the all clear was sounded. One bomb that Lt. Betz told about in his article landed about 100 feet more or less from where I was trying out my new foxhole. This raid did very little damage as the bombs struck the earth and made a large crater, but most of the shrapnel and dirt was deflected upward. When bombs struck the tall trees and detonated before hitting the earth, they were deadly.

This was a daily raid and for some unexplained reason, the island commander ordered our Marines not to fire at them. The Marines were furious at this, but after two raids, the Marines informed the commander that they would fire regardless. At the next trip, the Japs made a Marine 90 MM anti-aircraft gun set a new record for putting out shells. One gun was burned out from rapid fire and a gunner had blistered hands from handling empty shells. Eventually the enemy had more important things to worry about and left us alone. I was assigned to operating a tractor and scraper and building runways and revetments, taxiway etc. After 13 days we had enough runway completed. An Australian transport landed on it and not long after, a squadron of P39 fighters.

The Woodlark base was not used as much for an attack base as a base from which to extend to build other bases. In the jungle the Japs were only one enemy. The other was disease, mainly malaria. There were natives on Woodlark who were not far removed from head hunting and cannabilism. Some of them had worked in the coconut plantation and we used them to clear underbrush for the engineers. We had to take atabrine pills to suppress malaria. Atabrine was a synthetic quinine, which is generally used to control malaria. This pill had a yellow dye that eventually caused skin to turn yellowish. I became real sick about three weeks after being on Woodlark. I couldn't even keep a drink of water on my stomach. Our doctors were not the best. One was a good-looking young man who knew everything but did nothing. The other, an older man, was sympathetic and gave advice. "Take salt tablets and go down to the beach and rest." One evening I was real sick and in pain so I went to sick call and accidentally called the young doctor "doc" which he didn't take very well. He was busy trading shells with someone so I went back to my bunk and later my company chief petty officer came by to check on me. When I explained about the doctor, he told me to get in his jeep and took me to the Acorn 5 hospital. I never understood what the Acorn units were, but one was part of our task force and they had a good medical unit. A young doctor from Omaha took charge. I got a clean bunk and a

sleeping pill. The next morning we went over to another part of the island to an Army evacuation hospital. We were going up to the admission tent and a huge doctor from Virginia saw me from ten feet away and remarked, "You got a little touch of the jaundice, boy." Dr. O Donnel asked, "How could you tell?" He replied, "His eyeballs are yellow; atabrine makes the skin yellow but not eyeballs."

I spent about a week in the evac hospital. The wards were wall-to-wall canvas and wood frame cots so close together there was barely room for a corpsman or doctor to stand between. I was real sick. I don't remember what the medicine was, if any, but I didn't have to eat any more canned spam, Vienna sausages, or corned beef hash, which was another enemy in the jungle. I got rolls of hard candy, canned green beans, and potatoes from dehydrated potatoes. All of the food in the jungles came out of cans (eggs and potatoes dehydrated). I need to write here that I didn't have much confidence in our doctors. We had the finest hospital corpsmen. They were assigned from regular Navy service. I can't recall their names but one 2nd class petty officer was a young man, a survivor of the aircraft carrier Yorktown, which was lost in the Battle of the Coral Sea. Our chief corpsman was an older man, probably nearing his 20 years. Both had grey hair. We had other corpsmen and doctors later who were good and efficient men. The man on

the cot next to me had a fungus rash which was called jungle rot. I was sick at my stomach, and this poor guy was wrapped from head to foot with gauze soaked with vaseline. When they removed this gauze, he pulled off strips of skin and dropped them by the bed. Dr. O Donnel came by to check on me. I convinced him I was ready to go back to Acorn Five, which I did. At this time things were pretty well finished on Woodlark and we were about to advance to Finchhaven, New Guinea. The work accomplished on Woodlark consisted of building 6700 feet of coral surface runway, six miles of taxiway, one hundred and twenty three hard stands and revetments, control tower, weather tower parachute building with drying tower, 425 tents with wood frame and floors, a chapel, 33 miles of graded road, 32 aviation buildings moved, 397,000 cubic yards of coral for surfacing, forty-nine miles of transmission line and 340 miles of telephone line. Some of our members returned to our former bases a few years ago. Now there are luxury hotels. Our runway on Woodlark is still in good shape and being used, although it is overgrown with grass. At the reunion I had a conversation with Mr. Betz about how much we had done in such a short time. He remarked that while visiting some present time officers they wouldn't even have the paper work finished in the same time.

"Memories of the Sixtieth"

In reminiscing of the pride I have of being a Sixtieth Seabee, I would like to share some of the highlights with you and with those who were not in Heavy Equipment . . .

After the long rough trip on the Monroe we were fortunate to do the excavation for the Supply Depot as well as an ammunition dump for the Navy in Brisbane. This gave us an opportunity to find our operators and get the bugs out of the equipment as well as having some warm "Palimba" beer. An "Aussie" made this remark: "It would have taken our blokes 2 years to do what you Seabees did in 2 weeks."

When we received our orders to ship out to Townsville, we found that the wharf workers had gone on strike and would not load our equipment into the LSTs. After checking the area, we found an abandoned dock at Pinkenbaugh. As I recall, it was approximately 2 miles from our camp. After checking it out structurally, we found that we could shore it up for our purpose, as there were 2 large Northwest cranes belonging to the Army, parked with foliage around them by the Brisbane dock. We contacted General Krueger, who ordered his men to release them to us. It did not take R. D. Stevens and his crew but a short time to have them operating and on the move on the road to Pinkenbaugh, breaking water lines, which

we had anticipated. At the Dock we moved the first one on gingerly, weighing approx. 70 tons, checking the shoring; then the second one. We had the LSTs move alongside, as there was no area without doing a lot of excavation, that we could load through the Bow. With the two cranes rigged up as one, we loaded the Dozers and Shovels into the hold.

After our trip behind the Barrier Reef, we pulled into Townsville. It was about 11:45 p.m. The lights were on and the large wharf crane was operating. I jumped onto the dock as the operator was coming down. I introduced myself and asked if he would unload all the small equipment from the top deck, saving the time of by elevator. He said no and that to work overtime, his union had to be notified 24 hours. He pulled the switch and left. After waiting about 15 minutes we found the main switch and were lowering the hook when he angrily came back. I went to Capt. Fortson and Cdr. Tate and asked them to declare martial law. He answered that it was a Labor Gov't. and his hands were tied. After a roundtable discussion with some of you good men, we decided that since we were 8 to 9 feet above the dock and that the tide was going out, we could build a ramp with the gunnels from the hold and use of a cherry-picker that was on the deck. We had all the equipment off by daybreak and moved to the beach. This move saved one day.

At Woodlark we hit the beach around 2:00 a.m. in pouring

rain and unloaded in 2 hours. Shortly after daybreak I asked Commander Tate to get on a Dozer with me. After pushing trees and foliage for about one hour, we established the center of the strip in a short time, Bill Bottini and his crew giving us line and grade. On about the fourth day we were dumping Coral. I was standing there with the only dry shirt I had--a blue pajama top with silver stripes--when Marine Col. Harrison drove up, dressed in full combat uniform saying, "Betz, is that the uniform of the day of the Seabees?" I answered, "Yeah Colonel; ain't it a bitch?" He said, "You Seabees are the best construction men in the world but the most unmilitary bunch of bastards I have ever seen. See me at my quarters at 1700." I went to his tent at 5. He was smiling, holding a bottle of scotch, and asked me to get some ice and the beginning of a great friendship. We were limited to our truck loading equipment so we improvised the ditch digger and the Insley hoist cranes to loading units at Finch. With the help of structures, we excavated a long deep trench; then structures built a platform over the trench that we could run a tractor and loaded pan onto, then dump into the truck in the trench. As you may recall, the 808 Engineers had a lot of trucks and no loading equipment. Also at Finch we gained at least 3 weeks by barging the equipment from the landing zone to the strip area, bypassing mud and swamp. Thanks to the Army Engineers LCMs.

As Woodlark became operational, our next job was Finschafen. Cdr. Davidson, Bill Bottini and I were sent on a reconnaissance. We flew into Lae, then in an LCP to Finch. We arrived just about dusk. We did notice a tense atmosphere as we were being taken to "Dvie" (Headquarters) where we reported to an Aussie major, who advised that the Japs had penetrated their perimeter and that he had requested an air strike from Port Morseby in the morning, and I am sure Bill will agree that it was a "Good Morning" to see those planes.

After several days we had decided with the Aussies where we were going to land the LSTs and build the strip. We were leaving early in the AM in an LCM for Lae. Before we had cleared the harbor, the Beach Master gave orders to go to Scarlet Harbor to pick up some badly wounded Aussies. By the time we picked up approx. 14, they were in crude stretchers but cheerful. We had lost about six hours of the time we had needed to get back to Lae before dark. Nightfall did overtake us and then we heard what we did not want to hear--the roar of 2 PT boats. They were looking for Japs that had been resupplying their troops from this area, and they did not know we were in the area. Our skipper cut his engine and the wake of the PTs washed us toward shore. Glad at this time that I had had a recent personal talk with the Padre and knowing Bill as I do, I am sure he has a private line to the Man above. As the PTs left, we proceeded to Lae,

then to Woodlark. There, one of the first men I saw was Herman Hughes, telling him that the Japs were not a mile away as we had heard. He said, "Boy, that's good." Then telling him they were about 1500 feet, he remarked, "You ain't a bird-turden, is ya?"

My most embarrassing incident: An unexploded large bomb was uncovered on the excavation of the back taxiway. All activity stopped. I went to the area, climbed on a Dozer, loosened the coral around it and nudged it off the taxiway. As I was getting off the Dozer, Acorn 5's ordinance officer pulled up and really chewed me out, saying if I did not respect my own life, I should have considered the men. As the vibration from the dozer could have released the stuck pin, he was so right.

In closing, I want to personally thank you fellows for cracking the "Reifer" and getting the liquor. I was actually given more than I had coming. I found it under my cot. Finally, how many of you knew that Jack Dunn, who had charge of the lubrication crew, was an FBI plant? I did not until a reunion in Ohio when he and Merrill Dickerson, who was his official backup, told me.

I sent a copy of this to Bill Bottini for accuracy. His reply: "I believe what you wrote is good. There is one thing that stands out in my mind--the Aussie Lt. we bunked with. The Japs were bombing and Aussie's 25 pounders hitting

the Jap positions and he slept like a baby. I believe we were awake 90% of the time. No foxhole for him and none for us. Next morning he said goodbye and took off with his rifle to join his men. I can still see him and often wonder if he made it back. He had been thru hell at Tobruk and North Africa. He appeared to be the perfect picture of the soldier going back to war and did not care if he made it or not."

Bill and I both feel we were lucky to have served with a great group of knowledgeable men. We're proud to have been aboard.

Regis Betz

Part II

By the first of July we had accomplished all necessary work on Woodlark, and the W.A.C. began moving up to get our jobs so it was time to move on to another stepping stone, so to speak, on the road to Japan. The LSTs pulled up to the beach and we began loading our equipment. This had to be done in a scientific manner so when it came time to unload on the beach, everything could move out the right thing at the right time. All the cargo trucks were loaded with personal gear, mess and cooking equipment and so on. These were sent up the elevator and secured to the top deck. The last thing

loaded and the first unloaded were the big tractors and bulldozers. Every machine had a man assigned to drive it off. I was assigned to take off a case farm tractor which was supposed to run a sawmill. The only person whoever got any good out of that thing was the man who got the money for it. After it was dragged out of the way in New Guinea I don't know what became of it. Our mechanics later cut a bulldozer in two and used the engine for the sawmill. Our Tete Knot sawmill and Chief Van Handel's light and not-too-heavy truck company could produce 30,000 board feet of lumber every day. By this time all the mufflers on the machines had long since rusted away and you could hear the sawmill for 10 miles (maybe only 8). I think they should have sent a messenger to the sawmill for them to shut down so we could hear the air raid sirens.

After our equipment was loaded we set off for beautiful Langsmak Bay on the island of New Guinea. Doesn't that sound exciting and romantic? It was exciting but not romantic. A little incident that comes to mind that was amusing: When we departed the U.S., the labor unions donated several hundred cases of beer. We were issued a bottle of warm beer at mealtime, but it was so old it really wasn't worth the bother. When we reloaded the supplies, this beer was loaded in the tank deck very near the deck above. While we were loading, the cooks would walk out on the top deck, reach down

through a manhole and walk off with a case. One man coming after his second case, walked between two officers who were having a conversation. They stepped back, the guy got his beer and left, and the officers stepped up and continued their talk. In our organization, everyone looked out for each other so subsequently the beer was passed on to the other ships. There were 3 as I recall. The LSTs had crew quarters on each side that accommodated about 15 or 20 men. We were awakened every morning by the general quarters alarm. I was sleeping real sound when the gq woke me up. I thought it was a real short night. What had happened was the ship on our left had made a wrong turn and crashed into us. It wiped out a lifeboat davit and skinned up our paint job, but there were no casualties. I hope to get some pictures copied that show the crimp in the bow doors of the other ship. I don't know if the quartermaster on the other ship got a ticket for drunk driving or not but probably not. (Note: I now recall that this incident took place out of Townsville and not at Woodlark.)

The plan to land at Finchhaven would be to hit the beaches after dark, unload all ships that they could be back at sea by daylight. Our landing site was only 30 minutes air time from the large Jap base at Rabaul on New Britain Is. We approached the beach hours later than we should have, so the pressure on time was intense. We had been issued onboard a

single D size flashlight battery that had a little plastic cap on top that you tightened to turn on the bulb. To describe what it looked like would be obscene and what it was good for would be obscener.

At about 11:00 p.m. (2300 Navy time), we headed for the beach. All the operators and drivers had their engines running just like for the Indianapolis 500. The rain started on time so here we go. How the ships could pinpoint a particular spot on an unknown place in the dark has always baffled me. When an LST hits the beach, there should have been a slight crunch before it stopped dead. Here there was no crunch. The bow doors had been opened at sea and now the ramp was lowered, right into pure Pacific ocean water. I should say here that I was on only one of the ships. There were two others that had the same thing happening. Our first dozer left and hit the water rather than the beach, then another. Then they started to work pushing dirt up to the ramp for the trucks which wouldn't survive three feet of ocean. All the lower deck had to be cleared so they could unload the upper deck by elevators. I took my little case tractor with the iron wheels, steel lugs and all down the ramp, both wheels sliding full brakes, clickety click over the cleats on the ramp and into pure mud. By now the men on shore had cables and other tackle ready and were ready to literally drag off anything. We got the tractor out of the

road and as I said before, I don't know where it ended. As the T.V. commercial says, "Let it rust in peace." After I dismounted the tractor, I was given the job of finding room to get the machines and trucks far enough back from the beach so everything could be unloaded. Our orders were absolutely no lights. It was pitch dark and raining. The mud was now halfway to our knees and here at midnight I have to open up a parking lot. At this landing site there was no real dense jungle as there had been a coconut grove and some kind of place where they were husked and shipped. I lighted my little one-cell light so MM 2 e Leo Holsckaw could see to follow me. I don't know how, but my operation was successful. I unhooked cables from the trucks and ran back to the beach to lead a way for another. On one trip a dejected looking chief from headquarters company was standing on a hump at the base of a coconut tree. Heaven help him he had his little flashlight burning away. When Leo saw it he headed for it. The chief jumped away, but Leo took after him anyway so he moved again. I realized what was happening so I ran back and saved the chief's life and got Leo straightened out. I did this for the remainder of the night. At daylight the LSTs pulled out and we started sorting out the mess to begin some kind of organization. Our landing site was not the building site so all things had to be moved to a different location about a mile up the coast. The mud was

now so deep that nothing could move on its own power except the bulldozers. At daylight I could see that the Australian Army was bivouwacked in the grove. I saw where I had nearly run over them and didn't know they were there. Our cooks and bakers immediately got some canvas set up and started the field kitchen equipment. They fed the Aussies their first real meal in ninety days--hot biscuits and all. The Australians had traveled over land from Port Moresby.

Late in the evening as I was not assigned any other detail, I and some friends found a six-man tent and took it up to a higher place and set it up. We found cots and moved in. By this time the commissary department had things set up for a chow line, but I was so tired I wouldn't have walked across the road although it was 24 hours after our last meal onboard ship. We didn't bother to look for our personal things which by now were water soaked anyhow. I laid down on the cot and rested. I had run through mud and water half the night and most of the day. As soon as I got relaxed, the Aussies sounded air raid alert. The sentry blew a police whistle for the warning sound. We were in an open place so we went a little ways where there was a small stream and a ravine for protection. All Jap observation planes were named "washing machine charlie" due to an unusual sing-song throb in the engines. Charlie flew on so I went back to the sack. A little while later the same thing, so back to the creek

again. In a few minutes I went back to the sack in time to hear the whistle again. I was so tired I didn't care if I got killed anyway so I stayed home and slept until the next day.

At Finchhaven we built an airstrip, but here there was no coral for the surface so we built with dirt and covered it with steel mats made for that purpose. We were only minutes from Rabaul, New Britain and our fighters would always do a victory roll when they came back from their mission. At this base there were lots of B24 bombers and they also laid it on the Jap bases and also on the oil supply in bomber range. At Finch we had a better camp arrangement with streets and tents lined up in an orderly manner. All the departments had headquarter tents and even a daily paper--The Gagidue Gag. At this base we were always under air raid alert. The people in the armory dept. took the useless horns off some GI trucks and put them up in the trees; they made good air raid warning. We had so many warnings that we got to not paying much attention to them. One evening I had just finished chow and the horns blasted. I just for the hunch walked across the road to a foxhole and sat down on the edge. I heard bombs falling and hit the dirt. My heart was pounding so fast no machine on earth could have counted it. The men in the tents who failed to take cover had lots of casualties. Some got purple hearts. I just got scared about to death.

The Finchhaven base became a major base and staging area. The Army and Air Force and Navy began to arrive from other places like Lae, Burma and the islands where the enemy had been destroyed. Preparations were being made to retake the Philippines. Approximately 300,000 military personnel would be at this place.

At Finchhaven we found a new-to-us disease--Dengue fever, also called break bone fever. The reason they called it that is because that is what it felt like. It was also transmitted by mosquitoes. I got my case of Dengue, and 102° wouldn't get you anything but huge sulfa tablets which was the miracle medicine at this time in history. Usually this didn't last but a few days, but we did have a few that died from it.

After our assignments were finished in New Guinea, we were given a rest and recuperation leave back to Brisbane. We boarded landing craft and boarded the SS Sea Flasher, a new victory ship that of all things was an Army ship. Brand new and useless except to take us to Australia. This ship was one of the latest that was all electric powered by steam turbines. This was not a real pleasant trip except for the fact we were getting a much needed leave. We were all several pounds underweight and most of us had malaria.

Most of the space on the victory ship was used for electrical apparatus to move and control the ship. The bull

horn was constantly yelling, "Get off of something," like they expected us to stand with both feet in the air.

After arriving in Brisbane we were sent to various rest places the government had established for this purpose. I was in a group that was sent to a seaside resort called Sea Brae at Sandgate. There was really not much to do there, but we did have our own room and a real bed with a mattress and excellent food. We were free to come and go as we pleased without passes, but I never went anywhere except into the town to the pub. One Saturday night we had a dance and the W.A.C. sent a bus load of ladies over from Brisbane. The seventh fleet orchestra provided the music and it was very good.

The 55th CBs got the honor of running the supply depot which we had worked on, on our first arrival there. We used their base to stay while we were waiting for our ship to take us back to the islands. I was at this place when the Army invaded Europe. "D day."

When the time came we went down to the harbor and boarded an empty liberty ship that had been a day out at sea on its way back to the states. This was my sixth sea voyage and I had not yet been on a ship that was run by the Navy. The ship was furnished with wall to wall Army cots with barely enough room to get between them. They had built a wooden stairway from the hold to the top deck. This was

because this ship had never been intended for a troop ship. Our commissary department had bought supplies for our return trip, including a lot of good real ice cream. The ship's captain informed them they wouldn't be able to use any refrigeration space so we had to eat a week's supply of ice cream right now. They fastened the usual wood privy and a concession-style kitchen on topside so we sailed away eating our Vienna sausages and hard crackers. We used our GI mess kits for dishes.

The cruise of the Don Marquis is an experience in itself. We sailed up the coast, heading north. At evening I had first gotten through the chow line with my Viennas and crackers and canned peaches in one hand and a canteen cup of imitation lemonade in the other at the same moment our helmsman (driver) missed seeing a buoy marking a reef or turned too late. At any rate he hit it and our ship went to about forty-five degrees before it slid off. We were issued inflatable life belts on this ship. We sailed on, no apparent damage done, to a place called Milne Bay in New Guinea. We had canvas spread overhead on the afterdeck and played cards all day and everything considered, it was a pleasant ride. Top speed for a liberty ship was about 11 knots so we had lots of time.

On arriving in Milne Bay, the ship pulled in fairly close to shore and lowered the starboard anchor. Evidently

they had never done this before as they were unable to control it. Sparks flew thirty feet in the air, and when the anchor came to the end, the ship went down like a bobber and the chain broke. The anchor on the other side was equipped with less chain so we had to maintain our place by power and went in a circle until whatever we were there for happened and we departed for the rest of the trip. They didn't have to lift the anchor as that had already been taken care of. After being lost for a day in rain and fog a ship came through the straits. We sailed on to New Guinea. Here I have a lapse of memory as to how we moved from Finchhaven to our next base, but I remained on the liberty ship. It was joined by two other ships and an escort of destroyers and sub chasers. I think they were called corvettes or maybe not. After a three day stop, we at Finchhaven set out north for our next base--Owi Island near Biak off the coast of Dutch New Guinea. On this leg of the journey the Don Marquis missed a critical turn with the rest of the task force and sailed directly ahead into a mine field. One of the destroyers following behind fairly exploded the ocean, came alongside and ordered the Don Marquis to get back on course. The way it sounded I think they meant it. Owi Island was a perfect island for an airstrip. It was probably one and one half miles long and two miles wide. It was composed of coral and ideal for moving and was superior to concrete. There was

little mud and less trees as the best lumber had already been cut off years before; however, the undergrowth was dense. By this time during the war, the production in the U.S. had caught up with the demand and things were much better. We had refrigeration equipment, better food, less stress and better equipment. Our base on Owi was eventually as good as stateside. Our mess hall was becoming famous and men from all other branches began to arrive for dinner. We never turned anyone away, but it eventually got so bad the commissary department couldn't draw enough supplies to take care of the demand. If we had anyone to eat we had to get a ticket or note or whatever so the steward could draw their allotment.

I stayed aboard the Don Marquis until it was unloaded and then transferred to one of the other ships to help unload it. While off duty on this ship I stayed topside and watched the dive bombers work over the sea cliffs on Biak, about a mile and one half away. It was almost like watching a movie. As always, the Japs like a bunch of rats, were always in caves and holes and had to be taken out by hand grenades and flame throwers. Some writers and commentators claim the Japs were fearless, etc., but the fact is that they, for the most part, weren't. They were fanatics who believed that to die for their god was a sure one-way, first class ticket to the big rice bowl in the sky. Christians know that to die for

Christ is a sure way to gain heaven. The Japs have the same idea, but their god was Hirohito. When the Japs were faced with the suicide situation, they were given drugs to increase their bravery.

After the Don Marquis was unloaded, it, with some of our personnel, went to the Admiralty Islands, our main supply base for our men, to get hospital equipment and supplies. It rammed an oil tanker or vice versa and had to be run aground. I don't know if that skipper ever got back to the U.S. or not.

The base on Owi was used mainly for B24 bombers which could reach the Philippines, the oil refineries on Borneo and also nearby Jap bases in Dutch New Guinea. By now the Japs were really on the run, as they were losing their oil supply, most of their fighting ships in the Battle of Leyte Gulf and ability to strike back from the air destroyed. I don't recall ever being bombed on Owi Island. This was our easiest mission and things even got to the point that we had inspection. One of my pastime diversions was to take a ride in the B24s when they had test flights or practice bombing on one of the smaller islands. After our work at Owi was finished, the battalion was ordered to return to the United States. We went by small landing craft to board a Dutch merchant ship, the Tabinta (MS). We had to board this ship while it continued to go in a circle, as it had not been back

to its home port for six years and it could't disconnect the engine from the propeller or (screw) as it is in Navy talk. We boarded by climbing up cargo nets hanging over the side. The Tabinta had the largest diesel engine in the world, its engine rooms taking up most of the ship. This ship had Dutch officers and the crew was mostly East Indians. The officers wore white gold braid uniforms with short trousers, the crew only blue shirts and dungarees--no shoes. This ship was fairly old and had a wooden main deck and the crew washed it down every day. This ship was the cleanest place I had ever been, as every detail was polished or painted. It was designed for use in the North Atlantic and went through the Pacific waves without the least bump. After about thirty days we were met by a pilot and entered San Francisco Bay. It was so foggy that we could not see land at all. After a few hours we could look straight up and see the Golden Gate Bridge. What a beautiful sight. I had been in the Navy for over two years, across the Pacific and back and never been on a Navy ship. The Navy buses picked us up and took us back to Camp Parks. How that place had changed. There were paved streets, a large theatre, visitor center, gymnasiums and all the comforts of home, but in about two days we got our 30-day leave papers and I left for Arkansas and home. Merle had bought a pretty good frame house and had it paid for on an allotment of about a hundred dollars a month.

When my leave time was over I returned to Camp Parks where we were informed that the 60th CBs had been decommissioned and would be no more. I was sent to a sort of CB orphans' home to be ordered to some other battalion either as a part of a new crew or replacement. While in the orphans' home, I had to do humiliating things like picking up cigarette butts, guard duty and once on shore patrol. The brass here was back like in boot camp, trying to make life as miserable as possible. Camp Parks was commanded by a retired captain, and the station force was a battalion that had been returned from the Aleutian Islands. It was sad to listen to how they suffered because their fresh vegetables froze.

I have been using a book written by our Chaplain, Watt Cooper, who published a book called With the Seabees in the South Pacific. It is comprised of the letters that he wrote home to his wife and had all the dates in it for the places. Watt left before the rest of us, so from here on I don't know exact dates for things. I boarded the midnight special once more for Port Hueneme. This place had not changed much. I was assigned to the 136th battalion which was a stevedore and transportation unit. I should have remained with this unit as it was composed of nearly all very young men and there were only 3 petty officers to a platoon (about 40 men). I would have gotten my promotions which I had earned. However, I and four other men applied for a transfer to a construction

battalion, the 19th. After going back to school and basic training again where the instructors told us how rough it was going to be to take care of ourselves overseas, I eventually boarded a troop ship, the APA Six. It had a name, but I don't recall what it was. This was the first U.S. Navy ship I had ever been on. It was a good ship, all the fresh water we wanted and the living was easy. This was June, 1945. We left the U.S. and went to Pearl Harbor where we had a few days layover. Our next stop was in the Kwajalein Islands, from there to Ulithe in the Carslenes. When we left on the next leg of the journey we were part of a huge task force headed for Okinawa. This voyage took about 40 days and I and some friends played pinochle from daylight till dark. I arrived on Okinawa a few weeks before it was secured from the Japs. Here the 19th Ba built a huge supply depot to store everything in the world for the invasion of Japan. One detail I drew on Okinawa was to run the bulldozer at the landfill where the garbage from all units was dumped into a trench. Orders were to cover everything at once. When the trucks arrived, the Okinawan natives were waiting, and when the garbage was dumped, they swarmed on it like flies. I had to push the dirt over this with arms and legs flying everywhere, but as far as I know I never hurt anyone. The U.S. had set up relief camps for refugees, but the citizens had been told that the U.S. would torture and kill them. The

battle for Okinawa is a book in itself. Several have probably been written, and I have one that was written by an Okinawan. One day one of my tent mates came in and said there was a bomb dropped that was as powerful as 50,000 tons of TNT. I always thought this man had his head screwed on cross threaded so I told him so. He said, "It's on the bulletin board; go see for yourself." Which I did. I had prayed for the end of the war and shortly after, the atomic bomb. Peace was running down the streets.

When the Japs agreed to an unconditional surrender, word was received on Okinawa. You could see the outline of the island from the searchlights and tracer bullets. On the side where I was located they had a Jap bomber lock in the searchlight and a Kamikaze took out the cruiser Pittsburg. It was confusing. After the treaty was signed on the Missouri, the Navy began discharging men according to age and length of time. We volunteered in the Navy Reserve, and our enlistment was for the duration of the war so we were therefore sent back to the states to be discharged. I left on the APA ? named the Grimes. It was a new troop ship, and the flagship of a Commodore. We docked at San Diego and later got a pullman where I was sent to Lambert Field at St. Louis to be discharged. My discharge read not eligible for reinlistment. (Thanks a lot, Uncle). I didn't want to anyhow. Some afterthoughts.

When the 40th anniversary of the dropping of the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima was on the evening news, they had a story of Jack Lemmon and some other celebrities going to Japan to sympathize with them. They should have gone to the Truman library in Independence, Mo. and thanked God that we had a man with enough courage to put an end to this terrible slaughter and destruction. To think that the Japanese would have surrendered by being invaded was sheer ignorance. The Americans do not understand the philosophy of the Oriental mind. By now Uncle Sam was standing on Tojo's foot and looking down his shirt. The islands of Saipan, Tinian, Okinawa, the Philippines and others were bases for the new B29 bombers, and they were bombing Japan day and night with little or no opposition. Raids of 150 bombers at one mission were destroying Japanese cities, 10 or more square miles at a time. The U.S. was prepared for the invasion, and it would have taken place shortly, as all plans were made when and where to strike. Now about how I feel about the wimps feeling sorry for Hiroshima. Had they no sorrow for the 145,000 we killed on Okinawa? Are they any deader than the 33,000 we starved to death at Wewak, New Guinea? Would a soldier on Iwo Jima been willing to trade places? Or why not think about the two million Italians who died for nothing. People now less than fifty years old probably don't know anything about World War Two. I say to them the United

States does not owe an apology to anyone in the world. In fact the world owes us a lot more than that and our politicians should start collecting some of it.

Some incidental remembrances. When we left Pt. Huememe on the _President Monroe_, the commander of the base had a huge dog. Somehow it got smuggled onboard ship and went with us to Australia. The dog was named "Seabee" and made the rounds of the ship every day giving everyone a greeting. Needless to say the captain at Pt. Huemene was pretty mad. When we arrived in Brisbane the authorities couldn't permit a dog to land without being vaccinated and put in quarantine so we painted Chief Petty Officer stripes on his shoulders, gave him a S.W. Pacific campaign ribbon and sent him home.

About our Chaplains. Our very own assigned to our battalion was Watt Cooper from Chapel Hill, N.C. He was of Presbyterian denomination, and in his book which I mentioned, he took some big swipes at the Catholic men. He wrote one letter complaining that the Catholic Chaplain had shown some pictures of the chapel that the battalion built he said he built it when he had done it himself. The truth of the matter is that Cooper didn't build one damn thing and the church building was for the use of anyone who needed it. In another letter, he wrote about the farewell party for the Catholic Chaplain and didn't go, as he assumed there would be a lot of liquor flowing. The fact here is that Father

Gehring neither drank liquor nor smoked. One other letter he wrote that he had Catholic men working on the chapel and they were pretty good men anyhow even if they were Catholics. Chaplain Cooper was a good chaplain for those who needed his services. I can understand a human being a hypocrite or bigot or envious, but there is no excuse for ignorance and that's the way I see it.

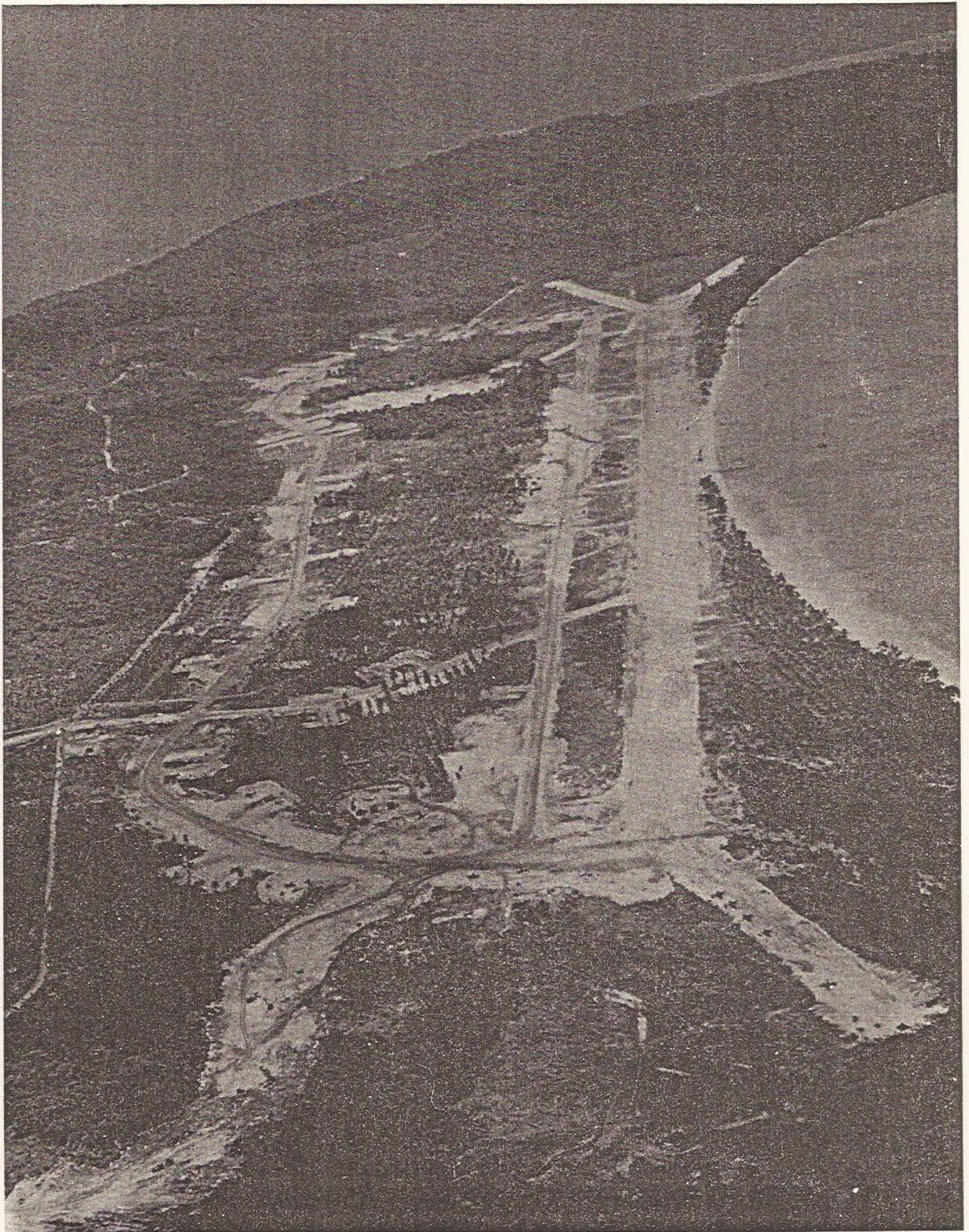
About the Catholic Chaplain, Fr. Gehring. Father Gehring was a missionary in China before World War II. How he got in the Navy I don't know. He was with the Marines and sixth Seabee battalion on the Guadal Canal invasion. He was chaplain for the Marines, the 20th CB Bn., the 60th CB Bn. and other units or ships that had no chaplain. Father Gehring was a violinist and played for our stage show which we had every week with local talent. It was called the "Atabrine Show" and was very good. Father Gehring had many interesting experiences. He comes to our reunion every year, has a wonderful time and still plays his violin for us. He retired as Captain, U.S.N. and is now in Philadelphia, Pa.

This has been a long letter and I hope not too boring.

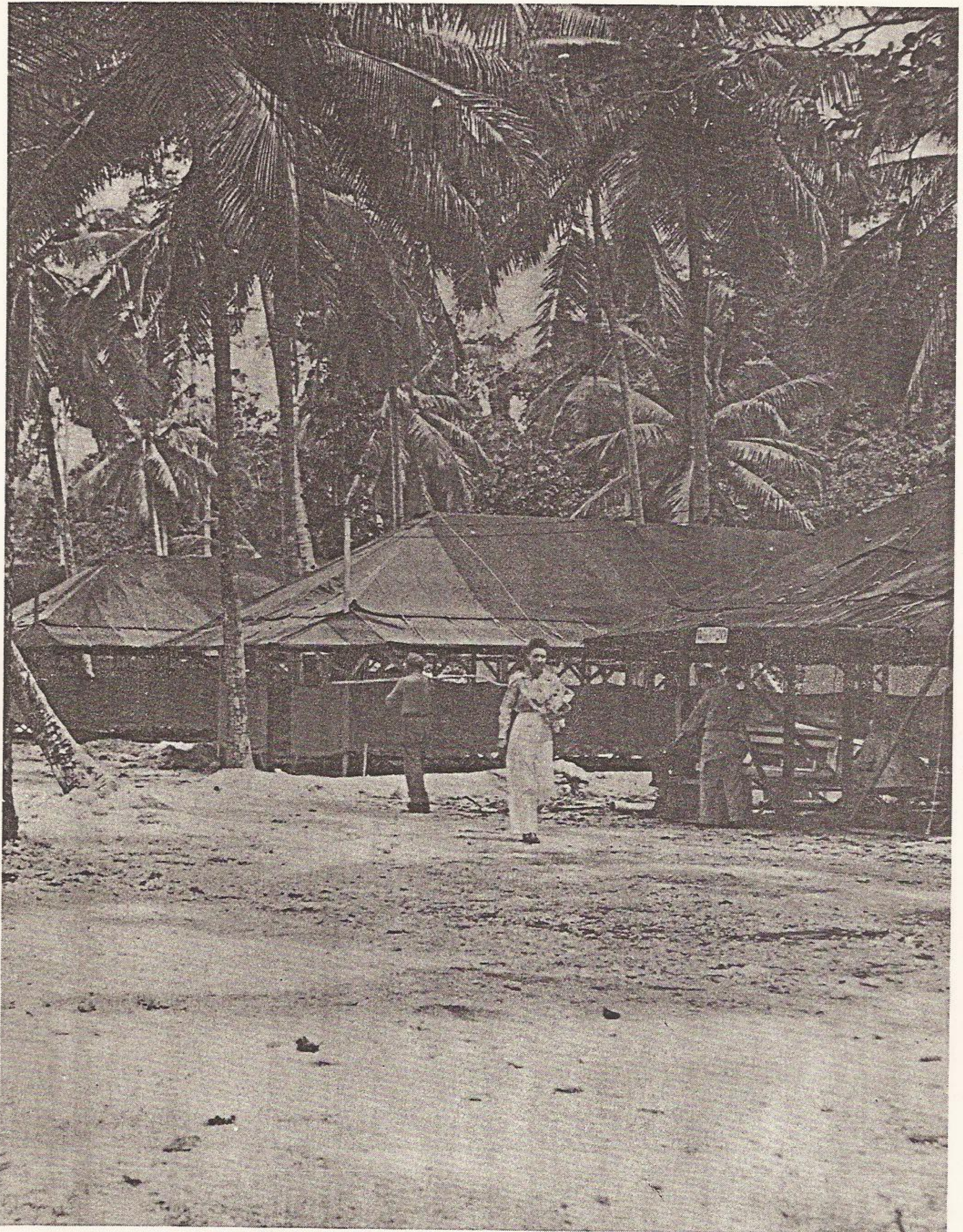
Note: The Aussies we joined at Finchhaven were the "rats of trobak." They were sent from the Middle East directly to New Guinea, as the Japs were ready and able to invade the

northern territory and probably would have.

Also at Finchhaven we were assisted by the 808 Army engineers on the airstrip and sawmill.



AIR VIEW OF WOODLARK BASE

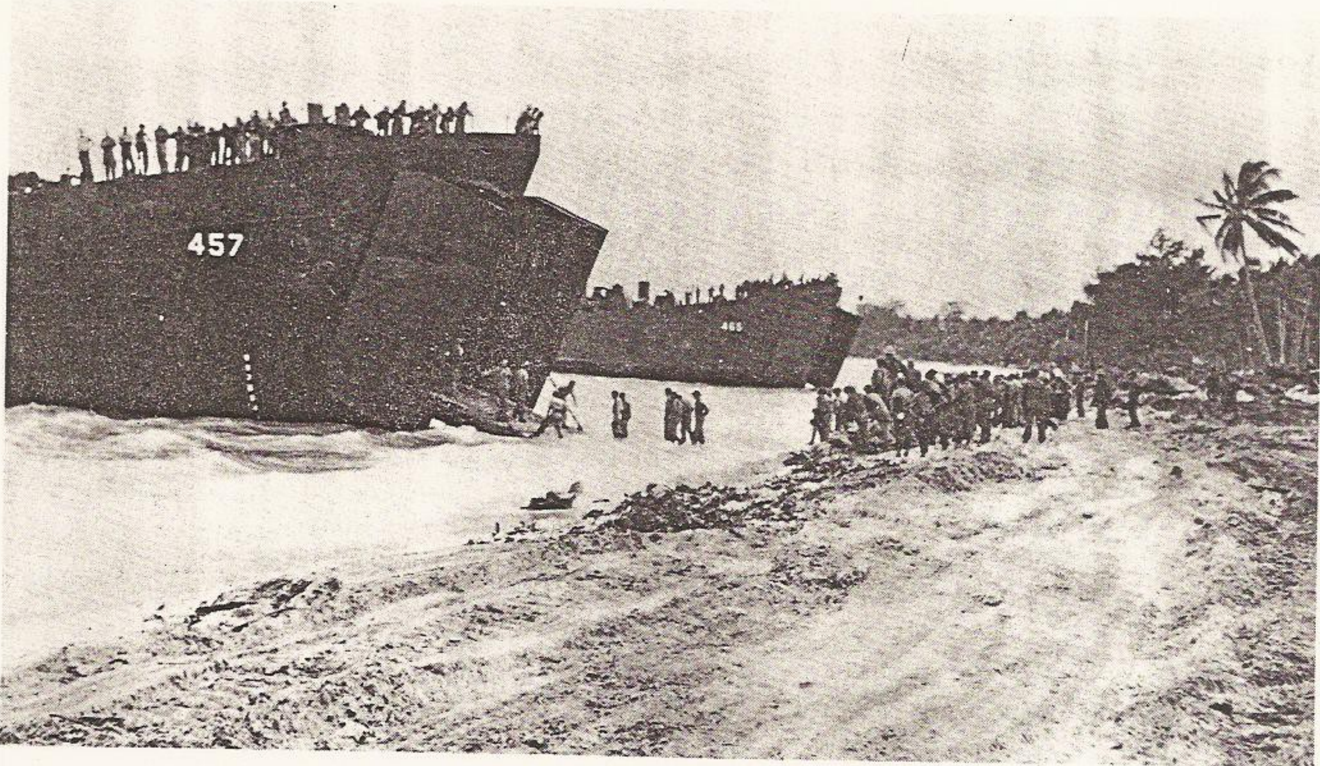


17th (ARMY) STATION HOSPITAL

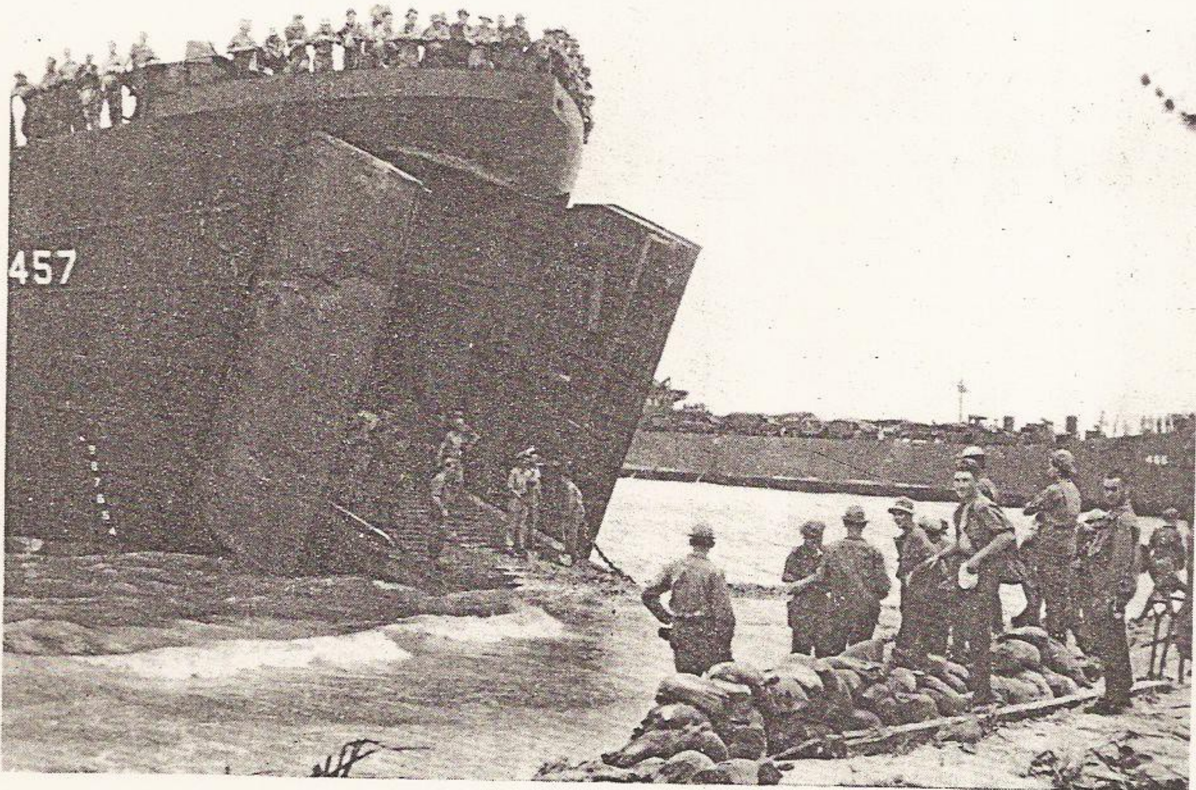
MUD, MUD, MUD . . .

A FEW HOURS AFTER COMING ASHORE

THE LANDINGS



ARRIVAL OF A LATER ECHELON



TOWNSVILLE (continued)

Some of us sailed to Townsville; others traveled overland and had the chance to see something of the interior of Australia. At Townsville — about which the least said, the better!—we went through the weary business of loading and unloading . . . The U.S.A. seemed *very* good, just then—and *very* far away!